Our Listless Universities

by Allan Bloom

Today's students do not believe in anything—and our best universities are doing nothing about it, nor can they. The great questions of life do not touch the young and universities that should lead in the quest for answers are the very source of the lack of interest.

I begin with my conclusion: students in our best universities do not believe in anything, and those universities are doing nothing about it, nor can they. An easy-going American kind of nihilism has descended upon us, a nihilism without terror of the abyss. The great questions—God, freedom, and immortality, according to Kant—hardly touch the young. And the universities, which should encourage the quest for the clarification of such questions, are the very source of the doctrine which makes that quest appear futile.

The heads of the young are stuffed with a jargon derived from the despair of European thinkers, gaily repackaged for American consumption and presented as the foundation for a pluralistic society. That jargon becomes a substitute for real experiences and instinct; one suspects that modern thought has produced an artificial soul to replace the old one supplied by nature, which was full of dangerous longings, loves, hates, and awes. The new soul's language consists of terms like *value, ideology, self, commitment, identity*—every work derived from recent German philosophy, and each carrying a heavy baggage of dubious theoretical interpretation of which its users are blissfully unaware. They take such language to be as unproblematic and immediate as night and day. It now constitutes our peculiar common sense.

The new language subtly injects into our system the perspective of "do your own thing" as the only plausible way of life. I know that sounds vaguely passe, a remnant leftover from the Sixties. But it is precisely the routinization of the passions of the Sixties that is the core of what is going on now, just as the Sixties were merely a radicalization of earlier tendencies.

The American regime has always attempted to palliate extreme beliefs that lead to civil strife, particularly religious beliefs. The members of sects had to obey the laws and be loyal to the Constitution; if they did so, others had to leave them alone. To make things work, it was thought helpful that men's beliefs be moderated. There was a conscious, if covert, effort to weaken religious fervor by assigning religion to the realm of opinion as opposed to knowledge. But everyone had to have an intense belief in the right of freedom of religion; the existence of that natural right was not to be treated as a matter of opinion.

The insatiable appetite for freedom to live as one pleases thrives on this aspect of modern democratic thought. The expansion of the area exempt from legitimate regulation is effected by contracting the claims to moral and political knowledge. It appears that full freedom can be attained only when there is no such knowledge. The effective way to defang oppressors is to persuade them that they are ignorant of the good. There are no absolutes: freedom is absolute.

A doctrine that gives equal rights to any way of life whatsoever has the double advantage of licensing one's own way of life and of giving one a democratic good conscience. The very lack of morality is a morality and permits what Saul Bellow has called "easy virtue," a mixture of egotism and high-mindedness. Now, in feeling as well as in speech, a large segment of our young are open, open to every "lifestyle."

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But the fatal consequence of this openness has been the withering of their belief in their own way of life and of their capacity to generate goals. The palliation of beliefs culminates in pallid belief. A soul which esteems indiscriminately must be an artificial soul, and that, to repeat, is what we are coming near to constituting, not by some inevitable historical process but by a conscious education project. This project masquerades as the essential democratic theory without which we would collapse into tyranny or the war of all prejudices against all. Its premise is that truth itself must be prejudice or at least treated as such.

The tendency toward indiscriminateness—the currently negative connotation of the word *discrimination* tells us much—is apparently perennial in democracy. The need to subordinate the more refined sensibilities to a common denominator and the unwillingness to order the soul's desires according to their rank conduce to easy-goingness. The democratic ethos obscures the reason for the desirability of such self-mastery. This is the moral problem of democracy and why fortuitous external necessities like war or poverty seem to bring out the best in us. Plato describes the natural bent of the democratic man thus:

> He . . . also lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastics, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it's moneymakers, in that one. And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed he follows it throughout.

This account is easily recognizable when applied to the middle-class youth who attend America's top colleges and universities. But Plato's description omits a more sinister element in our situation. Plato's young man believes that each of the lives he follows is really good, at least when he follows it. His problem is that he cannot keep his mind made up. Our young person, by contrast, is always plagued by a gnawing doubt as to whether the activity he undertakes is worth anything, whether this end is not just another "value," an illusion that men once believed in but which our "historical consciousness" reveals as only a cultural phenomenon. There are a thousand and one such goals; they are not believed in because they exist, they exist because one believes in them. Since we now know this, we can no longer believe. The veil of illusion has been torn away forever. The trendy language for this alleged experience is *demystification* or *demythologization*. This teaching now has the status of dogma. It leads to a loss of immediacy in all experience and a suspicion that every way of life is a "role." The substitution of the expression "lifestyle," which we can change at will, for the good life, the rational quest for which is the origin of philosophy, tells the story. That is what I mean by nihilism, and this nihilism has resulted from a questionable doctrine that we seem no longer to question.

Today, a young person does not go off to the university with the expectation of having an intellectual adventure.

All of us who are under sixty know something about this doctrine and its transmission, for since the Thirties it is what the schools have been teaching. For fifty years the only spiritual substance they have been trying to convey is openness, the disdain for the ethnocentric. Of course, they have also been teaching the three Rs, but their moral and intellectual energy has been turned almost exclusively in this direction. Schools once produced citizens, or gentlemen, or believers; now they produce the unprejudiced. A university professor confronting entering freshmen can be almost certain that most of them will know that there are no absolutes and that one cannot say that one culture is superior to another. They can scarcely believe that someone might seriously argue the contrary; the attempt to do so meets either self-satisfied smiles at something so old-fashioned or outbursts of anger at a threat to decent respect for other human beings. In the Thirties this teaching was actually warring against some real prejudices of race, religion, or nation; but what remains now is mostly the means for weakening conviction when convictions have disappeared.

The doctrine of cultural relativism did not emerge from the study of cultures. It was a philosophic doctrine that gave a special interpretation of the meaning of culture and had a special political attractiveness. It could appeal to the taste for diversity as opposed to our principled homogeneity. All kinds of people climbed aboard—disaffected Southern snobs who had never accepted the Declaration and the Constitution anyhow, Stalinists who wanted us to love Soviet tyranny without being too explicit about it, and similar types. No choices would have to be made. We could have the charms of old cultures, of what one now calls roots, along with democratic liberties. All that was required was an education making other ways attractive and disenchanting one's own. It is not so much the knowledge of other cultures that is important, but the consciousness that one loves one's own way because it is one's own, not because it is good. People must understand that they are what they are and what they believe only because of accidents of time and place.

The equality of values seemed to be a decisive step in the march of equality. So sure were our social scientists of the truth and vigor of democracy that they did not even dimly perceive what Weber knew, that his view undermined democracy, which stands or falls with reason. Only democracy traces all its authority to reason; other kinds of regimes can more or less explicitly appeal to other sources. When we talk about the West's lack of conviction or lack of will, we show that we are beginning to recognize what has happened to us. Exhortations to believe, however, are useless. It is only by thinking ideas

through again that we can determine whether our reason can any longer give assent to our principles.

But this serious reconsideration is not taking place in the universities.

II

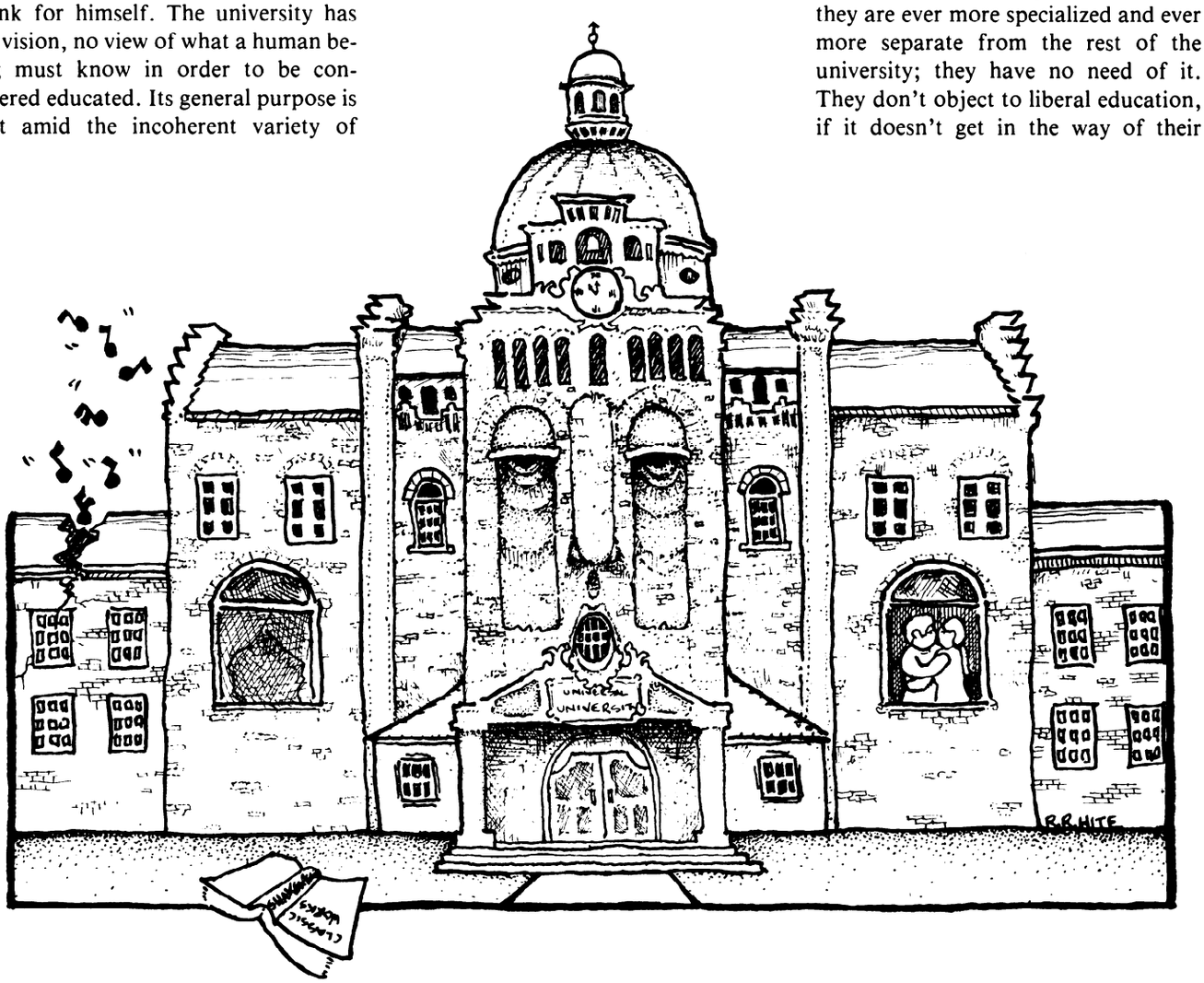
Today a young person does not generally go off to the university with the expectation of having an intellectual adventure, of discovering strange new worlds, of finding out what the comprehensive truth about man is. This is partly because he thinks he already knows, partly because he thinks such truth unavailable. And the university does not try to persuade him that he is coming to it for the purpose of being liberally educated, at least in any meaningful sense of the term—to study how to be free, to be able to think for himself. The university has no vision, no view of what a human being must know in order to be considered educated. Its general purpose is lost amid the incoherent variety of special purposes that have accreted within it. Such a general purpose may be vague and undemonstrable, but for just this reason it requires the most study. The meaning of life is unclear, but that is why we must spend our lives clarifying it rather than letting the question go. The university's function is to remind students of the importance and urgency of the question and give them the means to pursue it. Universities do have other responsibilities, but this should be their highest priority.

They have, however, been so battered by modern doctrines, social demands, the requirements of the emancipated specialties, that they have tacitly agreed not to open Pandora's box and start a civil war. They provide a general framework that keeps the peace but they lack a goal of their own.

When the arriving student surveys the scene, he sees a bewildering variety of choices. The professional schools beckon him by providing him with an immediate motive: a lucrative and prestigious livelihood guaranteed by simply staying in the university to the conclusion of training. Medicine and law were always such possibilities; with the recent addition of the MBA, the temptation has radically increased. If the student decides to take this route, liberal education is practically over for him.

If he first turns his eye to what was traditionally thought to be the center of the university, he will confront—aside from a few hot programs like black studies, native studies, women's studies, which are largely exercises in consciousness-raising—the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.

The natural sciences thrive, full of good conscience and good works. But they are ever more specialized and ever more separate from the rest of the university; they have no need of it. They don't object to liberal education, if it doesn't get in the way of their



research and training. And they have nothing to say, even about themselves or their role in the whole human picture, let alone about the kinds of questions that agitated Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz. Their results speak for themselves, but they do not say quite enough.

The social sciences are the source of much useful research and information, but they are long past the first effervescence of their Marxist-Freudian-Weberian period. Then they expected to find a new and more scientific way to answer the old questions of philosophy. Such hopes and claims quietly disappeared from the scene during the past 15 years. Their solid reasons for existence are in specialized study of interest rates, Iranian politics, or urban trends. Practically no economist conceives of doing what Adam Smith did, and the few who try produce petty and trivial stuff. The case is pretty much the same for the other social sciences. They are theoretically barren, and the literature read and used by them is mostly ephemera of the last fifty years.

The remainder is to be found in the humanities, the smallest, least funded, most dispirited part of the university. The humanities are the repository of the books that are at the foundation of our religion, our philosophy, our politics, our science, as well as our art. Here, if anywhere, one ought to find the means to doubt what seems most certain. Only here are the questions about knowledge, about the good life, about God and love and death, at home in the university. If, however, one looks at the humanistic side of the campus, one finds a hodgepodge of disciplines, not integrally related with one another and without much sense of common purpose. The books are divided up among language departments, according to the largely accidental fact of the language in which they were written. Such departments have as their primary responsibility the teaching of the language in question (a very depressing responsibility now that languages have fallen into particular disfavor with students).

Of all university members, humanists have the least self-confidence.

Humanists in general are the guardians of great books, but rarely take seriously the naive notion that these books might contain the truth which has escaped us. Yet without the belief that from Plato one might learn how to live or that from Shakespeare one might get the deepest insight into the passions and the virtues, no one who is not professionally obligated will take them seriously. Try as they may, the humanities will fail to interest if they do not teach *the truth*, even as natural and social science are supposed to do. To present the great writers and artists as representatives of cultures or examples of the way thought is related to society, or in any of the other modes common today, is to render them uninteresting to the healthy intellect. The comprehensive questions have their natural home in the humanities, but it is there that the historical-cultural doubt about the possibility of answering them is most acute. Professors of humanities more than any others wonder whether they have a truth to tell.

Philosophy should, of course, provide the focus for the most needful study. But it is just one department among many and, in the democracy of the specialties, it no longer has the will to insist that it is the queen of the sciences. Moreover, in most philosophy departments the study of the classic texts is not central. Professors "do" their own philosophy and do not try to pose the questions as they were posed by the old writers. This is especially the case for the dominant school of thought in the United States, the Oxford school.

Of all university members, humanists have the least self-confidence. The students are abandoning them, and they have difficulty speaking to the concerns of the age. They fear they may have to huckster—if they are not already doing so—in order to keep afloat. In their heart of hearts many doubt that they have much to say. After all, most of the writers they promote can be convicted of elitism and sexism, the paramount sins of the day.

There are, to be sure, many dedicated individuals in the humanities who know what needs to be done and can draw students' attention to the impoverished state of their experience and show them that great texts address their concerns. But the endeavor of these professors is a lonely one with little corporate resonance. The students are not reading the same books and addressing the same questions, so that their common social life cannot be affected by a common intellectual life.

The new education requirements are little more than tours of what is being done in the various workshops.

It should be added that the humanities are also the center of some of the fastest selling intellectual items of the day—structuralism, deconstructionism, and Marxist humanism. The members of these schools—particularly rampant in comparative literature—do read books and talk big ideas. In that sense they are the closest thing to what the university should be about. The problem with them, and all of them are alike in this respect, is that the books are not taken seriously on their own grounds but are used as vile bodies for the sake of demonstrating theses brought to them by the interpreters. They know what they are looking for before they begin. Their approaches are ultimately derived from Marx or Nietzsche, whose teachings are tacitly taken to be true.

It is small wonder that the student is bewildered about what it means to be educated. The new liberal education re-

quirements some universities are instituting are little more than tours of what is being done in the various workshops. To be sure, they always add on a course requirement, in a non-Western civilization or culture, but that is just another bit of demagogy serving the indoctrination of openness. Serious physicists would never require a course in non-Western physics. Culture and civilization are irrelevant to the truth. One finds it where one can. Only if truth is relative to culture does this make sense. But, once again, this is our dogma, accepted for covert political reasons. This dogma is the greatest enemy of liberal education. It undermines the unity of man, our common humanity in the intellect, which makes the university possible and permits it to treat man as simply without distinction.

III

Three conclusions have forced themselves on me about students, their characters and ways, conclusions that have to do with their education and their educability. They are not scientific generalizations based on survey research, but they are the result of long observation of, and careful listening to, young people in our better universities by one who is intensely interested in their real openness, their openness to higher learning.

1. *Books.* They are no longer an important part of the lives of students. "Information" is important, but profound and beautiful books are not where they go for it. They have no books that are companions and friends to which they look for counsel, companionship, inspiration, or pleasure. They do not expect to find in them sympathy for, or clarification of, their inmost desires and experiences. The link between the classic books and the young, which persisted for so long and in so many circumstances, and is the only means of connecting the here and the now with the always, this link has been broken. The Bible and Plutarch have ceased to be a part of the soul's furniture, an incalculable loss of fullness and awareness of which the victims are unaware.

The loss of the taste for reading has been blamed on television, the universal villain of social critics. But lack of reverence for antiquity and contempt for tradition are democratic tendencies. It should be the university's business to provide a corrective to these tendencies; however, I believe that the universities are most to blame for them. After all, they taught the schoolteachers. For a very long time now the universities have been preoccupied with abstract modern schools of thought that were understood to have surpassed all earlier thought and rendered it obsolete. And their primary concern has been to indoctrinate social attitudes, to "socialize," rather than to educate. The old books are still around, but one "knows" that they contain mere opinions, no better than any others. The result is true philistinism, a withering of taste and a conformity to what is prevalent in the present. It means the young have no heroes, no objects of aspiration. It is all both relaxing and boring, a soft imprisonment.

The most powerful formative influence on children is rock music and all that goes with it.

2. *Music.* While I am not certain about the effects of television, I am quite certain about those of music. Many students do not watch much television while in college, but they do listen to music. From the time of puberty, and earlier, music has been the food of their souls. This is the audio generation. And classical music is dead, at least as a common taste. Rock is all there is.

There is now one culture for everyone, in music as in language. It is a music that moves the young powerfully and immediately. Its beat goes to the depth of their souls and inarticulately expresses their inarticulate longings. Those longings are sexual, and the beat appeals almost exclusively to that. It caters to kiddy sexuality, at best to puppy love. The first untutored feelings of adolescents are taken over by this music and given a form and a satisfaction. The words make little difference; they may be explicitly sexual, or sermons in favor of nuclear disarmament, or even religious—the motor of it all is eroticism. The youngsters know this perfectly well, even if their parents do not.

Rock music caused a great evolution in the relations between parents and children. Its success was the result of an amazing cooperation among lust, art, and commercial shrewdness. Without parents realizing it, their children were liberated from them. The children had money to spend. The record companies recognized as much and sold them music appealing to their secret desires. Never before was a form of art (however unquestionable) directed to so young an audience. This art gave children's feelings public respectability. The education of children had escaped their parents, no matter how hard they tried to prevent it. The most powerful formative influence on children between 12 and 18 is not the school, not the church, not the home, but rock music and all that goes with it. It is not an elevating but a leveling influence. The children have as their heroes banal, drug- and sex-ridden guttersnipes who foment rebellion not only against parents but against all noble sentiments. This is the emotional nourishment they ingest in these precious years. It is the real junk food.

One thing I have no difficulty teaching students today is the passage in the *Republic* where Socrates explains that control over music is control over character and that the rhythm and the melody are more powerful than the words. They do not especially like Socrates's views on music, but they understand perfectly what he is about and the importance of the issue.

3. *Sex.* No change has been so rapid, so great, and so surprising as the change in the last twenty years concerning sex and the relations between

the sexes. Young people of college age are very much affected by the sexual passion and preoccupied with love, marriage, and the family (to use an old formula that is now painfully inadequate to what is really meant). It is an age of excitement and uncertainty, and much of the motivation for study and reflection of a broader sort comes from the will to adorn and clarify erotic longings.

It is, however, in this domain that the listless, nihilistic mood has its practical expression and most affects the life of the students. The prevailing atmosphere deprives sex of seriousness as well as of charm. And, what is more, it makes it very difficult to think about sex. In a permissive era, when it is almost respectable to think and even do the deeds of Oedipus, shame and guilt have taken refuge in a new redoubt and made certain things unthinkable. Terror grips man at the thought he might be sexist. For all other tastes there is sympathy and support in universities. Sexism, whatever it may mean, is unpardonable.

The great change in sexual behavior has taken place in two stages. The first is what was called the sexual revolution. This meant simply that pre- and extra-marital sex became much more common, and the various penalties for promiscuity were either much reduced or disappeared. In the middle Sixties I noticed that very nice students who previously would have hidden their affairs abandoned all pretense. They would invite their professors to dine in apartments where they lived together and not hesitate to give expression to physical intimacy in a way that even married couples would rarely do before their peers.

This kind of change, of course, implied a very different way of thinking about things. Desire always existed, but it used to war with conscience, shame, and modesty. These now had to be deprecated as prejudices, as pointing to nothing beyond themselves. Religious and philosophic moral teachings that supported such sentiments became old hat, and a certain materialism which justified bodily satisfaction seemed more plausible.

The world looks very different than it once did to young people entering college. The kinds of questions they ask, and the sensitivities they bring to these fresh circumstances, are vastly altered. The tension of high expectation has been relaxed; there is much they no longer have to find out. A significant minority of students couple off very early and live together throughout college with full awareness that they intend to go their separate ways afterward. They are just taking care of certain needs in a sensible way. There is, for a member of an older generation, an incomprehensible slackness of soul in all this. Certainly the adventurousness of such people, who are half-married but without the moral benefits of responsibility, is lamed. There is nothing wild, Dionysian, searching, in our promiscuity. It has a dull, sterilized, scientific character.

One must add that an increasing number of students come from divorced families and include in their calculation the possibility or the likelihood of divorce in their own future. The possibility of separation is not a neutral fact, allowing people to stay or go; it encourages separation because it establishes a psychology of separateness.

The result is inevitably egotism, not because the individuals are evil or naturally more prone to selfishness than those of another era. If there is no other thing to be attached to, the desires concerning ourselves are ever present. This tendency is particularly pronounced in an age when political ties are weak. People can hardly be blamed for not being attached when there is nothing that calls forth attachment. There can be no doubt that the sexual revolution plays a great role in dissolving the bonds founded on sexual relationships. What is not sufficiently understood is that in modern society there is little else that can be the basis for moral association. There is a repulsive lack of self-knowledge in those who attack the "nuclear family" and are rhapsodic about the "extended family" and real "community." Looseness is thus made into an ethical critique of our society. The "extended family" is no more possible in our time or consonant with our principles than is feudalism, while the "nuclear family" is still a viable alternative, but one that needs support in theory and practice. It provides a natural basis for connectedness. One can give it up, but one has to know the price. There is simply nothing else that is generally operative in society at large.

But even more powerful than all of the above changes are the effects of feminism, which is still early in its career of reform and is the second stage of the great change of which I am speaking. The theme is too vast to treat properly, but one can say that it, much more than the sexual revolution, takes place on the level of thought rather than that of instinct. Consciousness must be altered. Women have been exploited and misused throughout the entire past, and only now can one find out their real potential. We are on the threshold of a whole new world and a whole new understanding. And Right and Left are in large measure united on the issue. There is an almost universal agreement, among those who count for university students, that feminism is simply justified as is.

The most powerful changes are the effects of feminism.

The degree of common agreement comes home to me when I teach the Socrates fantasy in the *Republic* about the abolition of the difference between the sexes. Twenty years ago it was an occasion of laughter, and my problem was to get students to take it seriously. Today it seems perfectly commonplace, and students take it all too seriously, failing to catch the irony. They do not note the degree to which Socrates acts as though men and women have no bodies and lightly give up all the things that are one's own, particularly those one loves—parents, spouses, children. All of them are con-

nected with the bisexuality of the species. In doing this, Socrates shows the ambiguity of our nature and the degree of tension between our common humanity and our sexual separateness. The balance between the two is always fraught with difficulties. One must decide which has primacy; and this decision must be made in full awareness of the loss entailed by it. Our students no longer understand this.

It is here that a great difference between the situation of women and that of men comes to light. Women today have, to use our new talk, an agenda. They want to have the opportunity to pursue careers, and they want to find ways to reconcile this goal with having families. Also, it is their movement, so they are involved and excited, have much to talk about. The men, on the other hand, are waiting to be told what is on the agenda and ready to conform to its demands. There is little inclination to resist. All the principles have been accepted; it only remains to see how to live by them. Women are to have careers just as do men and, if there is to be marriage, the wife's career is not to be sacrificed to the man's; home and children are a shared responsibility; when and if there are to be children is up to the woman, and the decision to terminate or complete a pregnancy is a woman's right. Above all, women are not to have a "role" imposed on them. They have a right of self-definition. The women were the victims and must be the leaders in their recovery from victimization. The men, as they themselves see it, have to be understanding and flexible. There are no guidelines; each case is individual. One can't know what to expect. Openness, again, is the virtue.

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The result is a desexualization of life, all the while that a lot of sexual activity is going on, and a reduction of the differences between the sexes. Anger and spiritedness are definitely out. Men and women in universities frequently share common dwellings and common facilities. Sex is all right, but it creates a problem. There are no forms in which it is to express itself, and it is a reminder of differentiation where there is supposed to be none. It is difficult to shift from the mode of sameness into that of romance. Therefore advances are tentative, nobody is quite sure where they are to begin, and men's fear of stereotyping women is ever-present. It is love that is being sacrificed, for it makes woman into an object to be possessed. Dating is almost a thing of the past. Men and women are together in what is supposed to be an easy camaraderie. If coupling takes place, it must not disturb the smooth surface of common human endeavor. Above all: no courtship or courtliness. Now there is friendship, mutual respect, communication; realism without foolish fabulation or hopes. One wonders what primal feelings and desires are pushed down beneath the pat uniformity of the speech they almost all use, a self-congratulatory speech which affirms that they are the first to have discovered how to relate to other people.

This conviction has as its first consequence that all old books are no longer relevant, because their authors were sexists (if they happened to be women, they were maimed by living in sexist society). There is little need of the commissars who are popping up all over the place to make the point that Eve, Cleopatra, Emma Bovary, and Anna Karenina are parts of male chauvinist propaganda. The students have gotten the point. These figures can't move their imaginations because their situations have nothing to do with situations in which students expect to find themselves. They need no inquisition to root out sexist heresies—although they will get one. And in the absence (temporary, of course) of a literature produced by feminism to rival the literature of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, and Stendhal, students are without literary inspiration. Teaching romantic novels to university students (in spite of the healthy perseverance of this genre, as indicated by the success of the Harlequin romances—I find one free in every box of Hefty garbage bags I buy these days) is a quasi-impossibility. Students are either not interested or use it as grist for their ideological mill. Such books do not cause them to wonder whether they are missing something. All that passion seems pointless.

Notwithstanding all our relativism, there are certain things we know and which cannot be doubted. These are the tenets of the egalitarian creed, and today its primary tenet is that the past was sexist. This means that all the doubts which tradition should inspire in us in order to liberate us from the prejudices of our time are in principle closed to us. This is the source of the contentless certainty that is the hallmark of the young. This is what a teacher faces today. I do not say that the situation is impossible or worse than it ever was. The human condition is always beset by problems. But these are *our* problems, and we must face them clearly. They constitute a crisis for humane learning but also reaffirm the need for it. The bleak picture is often relieved by the rays of natural curiosity about a better way; it can happen any time a student confronts a great book.

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